

After the Fire: Advice for Salvaging Damaged Family Treasures

Cherished family heirlooms that survive a fire are often covered with soot and ash, requiring prompt and gentle attention to prevent further damage. The Heritage Emergency National Task Force, co-sponsored by FEMA and the Smithsonian Institution, offers these basic guidelines from professional conservators. Note that fire professionals only recommend salvaging cherished items that can be removed safely without sifting through ashes.

After a Fire

- Call your insurance agent as soon as possible to file a claim.
- Personal safety is always the highest priority when entering buildings damaged by fire.
- Check for structural damage before re-entering your home to avoid being trapped in a building collapse.
- Never attempt to salvage belongings at the expense of your own safety.
- Wear protective clothing—disposable nitrile or latex gloves, safety goggles, protective clothing (long-sleeve shirt, long pants, sturdy shoes or boots), and an N95 mask or face covering.
- Avoid breathing in or touching hazardous materials. Risks in fire-damaged areas can include particulates, exposed asbestos, lead-containing building materials (such as glass and lead paint), and chemical residues.
- If water has been used to put out the fire, mold may also be an issue and should not be inhaled.
- Take photographs of your damaged items for insurance purposes.

General Handling Advice

- Even though you will be sorely tempted, it is important to reduce the amount you handle or touch damaged items. Soot's very fine particles stick to everything, and every touch will grind it further into the item.
- Soot and ash are very abrasive and will further damage items through scratching.
- If your items were exposed to both heat and water, they will be even more fragile.
- Lift your objects carefully and avoid weakened areas; for example, support ceramics from the base rather than lifting by handles.
- Wear nitrile or latex gloves when handling objects; the greasy residue in soot can be permanently fixed to absorbent surfaces by skin oils.



- Avoid placing pressure on blistered or lifting surfaces, such as on paintings or photographs.
- Place items in supportive boxes or plastic containers until you can obtain further advice or are ready to begin cleaning.
- Keep in mind that the longer the soot remains on the item, the harder it is to remove.

Some Simple Cleaning Tips

- Do not use water—or any other cleaning solution! Water will drive soot and ash further into the surface of your item, and they will become impossible to remove.
- As soon as possible, vacuum the soot and ash off your item.
- Do not vacuum wet or damp items—wait until they are dry.
- It is preferable to use a HEPA filter in your vacuum cleaner.
- Use the vacuum on the lowest setting or insert smaller plastic tubes into the main tube to reduce suction.
- Do not use a brush, and do not allow the nozzle to touch the surface.
- Vacuum all exposed surfaces *before* opening out folded items such as textiles or books.
- If you want to remove further residue, soot sponges can be carefully used if the item is robust enough. Cut small pieces of the dry sponge for more accurate application and economic use. The dirty surface of the sponge can be cut off to expose a new cleaning surface. These sponges, often called dry cleaning sponges, are available at local home improvement stores.

Some Important Considerations

- Shelved books may be charred on the outside but intact inside. Vacuum the edges before you open the books—don't worry if some of the charred bits come off.
- Photograph albums may be stuck together—do not try to open them by force. You will need to take them to a conservator for advice.
- Heat can make glass, ceramic, and metal items very brittle—remember to handle them carefully.
- Fabrics in particular might look intact but may fall apart without very careful handling.
- Supports that you can slide underneath your belongings (sheets, boards, plastic) will enable you to safely carry more fragile items.
- You have now essentially done all you can to stabilize your items. It is likely that they will need further attention from a qualified conservator as they may be in a fragile state. Please keep in mind that, while items might look irretrievably damaged, there may well be treatments that will salvage them. Do not despair, but please seek conservation advice.

Contact a Conservator

Recovering items damaged by a fire is challenging. If a precious item is badly damaged, a conservator may be able to help. To locate a peer-reviewed conservator, click on the “Find an Expert” tab on the home page of the

American Institute for Conservation, www.culturalheritage.org. Also, you could contact the conservation/preservation department of a major museum, library, or archives for advice or contact the National Heritage Responders, the specially trained team of the Foundation for Advancement in Conservation.

Beware of Increased Flood and Mudslide Risks

One of the lesser known but critical considerations following a wildfire is the increased risk of floods and mudslides, even in areas far away from the fire. Properties directly affected by fires, as well as those located below or downstream of impacted areas, are most at risk, including many properties not previously considered as having a moderate or high flood risk. Residents in areas of extensive wildfires, or in areas susceptible to flash or winter flooding, need to prepare in advance for possible flooding.

Advice by Phone

A number of organizations offer free telephone advice following an emergency or disaster:

[National Heritage Responders](#), a team of conservators and collections care professionals trained by the Foundation for Advancement in Conservation, can answer your questions about salvaging an item. Email the team at NHRpublichelpline@culturalheritage.org. Cultural institutions can call their 24/7 emergency hotline: 202-661-8068.

[Regional Alliance for Preservation](#) (RAP) is a national network of nonprofit organizations with expertise in the field of conservation and preservation. Individual member organizations offer free emergency advice, many on a 24/7 basis. Click on the link to locate your nearest organization.

Additional Resources

- [After the Fire! Returning to Normal](#). FEMA FA-46/January 2019.
- [Soot and Ash Segment](#) from the *Field Guide to Emergency Response* video, Foundation for Advancement in Conservation. A short video walks you through salvaging items damaged by soot and water.
- [Fire](#). Chicora Foundation.
- [Rebuilding After a Wildfire](#). FEMA Federal Insurance and Mitigation Administration Fact Sheet.
- [Worker Safety and Health in Wildfire Regions](#). Cal/OSHA.



Co-sponsored by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Smithsonian Institution, the Heritage Emergency National Task Force is a partnership of more than 60 national service organizations and federal agencies created to protect cultural heritage from the damaging effects of natural disasters and other emergencies. For more information, visit the Heritage Emergency National Task Force website at cultural.rescue.si.edu/hentf or email HENTF@si.edu.